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THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOU

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I keep an eye out for malice growing
like someone caring for a bonsai, which will die
if you leave it alone for just one day.
My tiny tree of rage,
my bloodless guillotine,
the altar
to the bad person we all are.
In the dead calm
the echo of an eye for an eye lying in wait,
misshapen body of resentment,
crow perched on the branch of the funeral cypress,
awaiting
the cruel, joyful moment when we'll be at hand.

JOSÉ EMILIO PACHECO
"The Tree of Malice"

Translation by Katherine Hedeen and Víctor Rodríguez Núñez

On 6 September 1971, 111 Tupamaro guerrillas escaped from Punta Carretas Prison, through a tunnel and without firing a single shot. It was one of the largest breakouts in history, and became known as El Abuso. The event occupied a prominent role in Uruguayan popular culture, on a par with Ernesto Che Guevara's visit to the country in 1961, or the appearance of German cruiser *Admiral Graf Spee* in the Bay of Montevideo in 1939.

Ramiro Sanchiz, *La Diaria*

THE ESCAPE

Ursula doesn't hesitate: she pushes Luz into the mouth of the tunnel. They leave behind them the brightly lit stores, the colourful clothes, the television sets, a world full of people. There is just the sound of piped music and the voices of the crowd. But the fear hasn't disappeared. It clings to Ursula's clothes, permeates her sweat, constricts her throat. It's a strange fear, akin to vertigo, yet with a hint of forbidden pleasure.

The jaws of the tunnel close and the two women disappear into the most absolute darkness, the scene fades to black, the sound recedes. It's hard to imagine, in this world of ours so full of stimuli.

Luz cried a little at first, a few tears cutting her cheeks, but she's stopped now. Ursula has put the revolver back into the pink handbag squeezed tightly beneath her arm. She smells the earth, the soil, the damp roots, she smells the dust, the minerals, the iron and the clay.

Outside it is winter, a bright day, one of those days on which, with its heat and light, the sun tricks us into dreaming about spring, until we reach four in the afternoon.

They don't talk much because they need to conserve their strength to keep moving forward, to keep making progress. They know it's only fifty yards to the exit.

If they make it to the exit.

If the earth doesn't devour them.

A MONTH BEFORE THE ESCAPE

I

I can't help find it amusing that Daddy is sitting opposite me, in his armchair, drinking whisky from his favourite tumbler, wearing the suit in which we buried him. Outside, the winter sun grants a truce and mothers dash outside, pushing babies in strollers, leading children by the hand. And here I am, shut away at home, talking to a dead man.

How did it happen? Quite simply, one day I heard the key turn in the lock and it was him. It hadn't even been a week, perhaps not even three days, since the funeral.

I know he'll stand up and add another ice cube to his glass to make the whisky go further. I turn away because I don't want to look at him, and instead I watch the sun sinking into the river, tingeing the sky the most beautiful shade of red. He will observe me, he'll clear his throat before he speaks, to gain my attention, and I am already overwhelmed by the thought that he is going to censure my behaviour. What behaviour? Any of it. All of it.

It doesn't matter what I do, it doesn't matter how hard I try to please him, Daddy always finds some defect, something to hold against me. It makes no difference whether I've won a prize for my translation of *Remembrance of Things Past* or if I've just hijacked a truck: in his view, I'll always have done something wrong.

I defend myself before he can attack: I can't let him catch me off guard.

"Yes, Daddy. This morning I stole the cash from a gang of crooks that were hijacking an armoured truck. I showed up, took over the operation, and made off in a van loaded with the loot."

He will return to his armchair and fix me with his gaze; then he'll look at the golden liquid and rattle the ice cubes in his glass. He will sigh. I raise my head and challenge him the way I used to when I was a teenager. I recount details that I know will shock him.

"I shot the Hobo with my .38. I got Diego into the van, and we escaped with the cash. What do you make of that?"

He won't look at me, he'll avoid my eyes. I insist on telling him the most scandalous details until I start to feel ill, until my head hurts, which is what those of us unable to cry do instead of weeping. Then I change tactics, I lower my voice, I appeal for his pity, his compassion.

"I want a different life, Daddy. I want to be a different woman."

He will put down the tumbler before he stands up, before he goes over to the display case full of his Japanese figurines, and I hear the familiar sound of the soles of his shoes creaking on the floor, I see the black leather gleaming. Ever since he died he has recovered the springy step of his younger days. He will stop before the glass-fronted cabinet, he will observe, he will count, one by one, each of the 322 Japanese figures, made of ivory, porcelain, stone, wood; one by one he will inspect the princesses and opera singers and society ladies, the emperors and warriors and monks, the dogs and monkeys and rabbits. He will say they haven't been taken proper care of, that they don't look

clean, that they're dusty and I should make better use of the chamois and the flannels he left in the drawer…

I interrupt him.

"I know which drawer you left everything in, and I clean them just like you showed me."

He will shake his head and smile, a smile that says I'm not competent, not efficient, that I don't deserve this legacy.

"No, Daddy, that's not true. I take good care of the figurines. I go over them every Sunday with the brushes and the special cleaning fluids. You can get off my case because I'm not going to listen to you today. The place is exactly as you left it. Every time I open the door and I breathe in its smell, it's as if I'm breathing in the past, the past you left me, as if I'm inhaling every dead member of our family."

In the apartment where I live, there are sighs in dark corners, creaking floorboards, a cold draught blowing across the kitchen worktops. As I walk back and forth, I hear voices, old echoes squeezed in between the walls.

He will return to his armchair, to his whisky. After a few minutes, he'll take out the gold cigarette lighter, perhaps use it to light his pipe. Daddy was a successful man, and he spent his life hoping I would be successful too, that I would embody his idea of a perfect life: an intelligent, slender woman and, at my side, a man like him, cosmopolitan and sophisticated. But I was never slender and I never had at my side a man like the one Daddy would have wanted for me.

The darkness in the room is pierced by little shards of the Montevideo night. I look at him and know he will move on to his next reproach.

"Daddy, don't say that. I don't bite the hand that feeds me. What a horrible expression, 'the hand that feeds you'. How can you say that to me when you used to refuse to

feed me, when you punished me by locking me in my room without a scrap of food, so I'd be skinny like Luz and like Mother."

Once again, the memories stir my anger, my resentment; I allow them to flow and multiply, because it's better that way. My rage is the fuel that enables me to keep going. The images flit through my mind, because that's how memories work: they crush us without the least consideration for chronology. I toss more wood on the fire, run through his other criticisms, recall the punishments he inflicted on me, the hunger and the darkness in my bedroom. I don't want this hatred to end because, if it does, guilt will rear its head, and with it will come a pain I know I will be unable to bear. I prefer this buzzing of furious wasps inside my head.

During our lives we gradually grew to hate each other while at the same time we came to resemble each other. Now, ever since his death, ever since I sent him to that mausoleum surrounded by the flowers my sister leaves, we are almost the same person.

For a moment, he will become disturbingly still, his face totally free of expression, and his eyes will look up until his gaze meets my own. A slow smile will sketch itself on his lips.

"No, Daddy. Diego didn't disappear with my share of the money. Give him time, this has only just happened, he's going to call me, you wait and see. He might be a coward but he's a good man, a man of his word. It can't be easy, hiding so much money and struggling with his fear. I know he'll call sooner or later, though, and give me my share of the cash. I trust him. You'll see, Daddy. Sooner or later he'll do the right thing."

And there he sits, silent and motionless, looking at me with his caustic smile until, finally, he raises his arm and

takes a long sip of whisky as he ponders what to say next, how to attack me, to wound me. I know what he's going to say.

"I'm not going to renounce the new life that's waiting for me. Ill-gotten gains, you say? Maybe, but I'm not the one who stole it. I took it from the thief and I got away. And you know what? I don't care what you think."

He will look at me suspiciously, preparing his next attack. He'll open his mouth to speak, but I'll beat him to it.

"What do you want to say, Daddy? Well, I don't want to talk any more. Get back to your grave, get back to feeding maggots in that black hole of yours, and don't come out again."

He will shake his head, lower his gaze, feigning sorrow.

"Yes, Daddy, I know I used to listen to you. And I was afraid of you too, even if I didn't show it, even if you thought I was the rebel who defied you, but that defiance was just the form my fear took. I was a wounded animal, lashing out in terror."

I look at him, sitting there, so tall and thin, young and full of vigour despite the fact that he's dead, a steely look in his eyes, his shoes gleaming black, almost ferocious. He will take the golden lighter out again, toying with the flame that appears and disappears. His gaze will turn serious. The gaze that used to make me tremble.

"How much have I suffered because of my fear, Daddy darling? The fear I used to feel. But not any more. Death has tamed your ferocity. You're just one more corpse in the cemetery where your other daughter, Luz, brings you flowers each year. Yes, Luz is lucky – sticking some flowers in a couple of vases is enough to put her conscience at ease. I don't have a conscience, not an easy one or a guilty

one, I don't have any debts to settle with the dead, I don't owe them anything I haven't already paid. And I've already collected the debts they owed me. As far as I'm concerned, the dead can rot in hell for all eternity."

There he sits, another reproach forming on his lips, and I feel the fire burning in my guts, my head pounding, and even if it only lasts a second, it's long enough to show that it's not true that time heals everything. Pain endures, it's always there. Why do children inherit a bitter legacy that doesn't belong to them?

The dark doesn't bother me; only the daytime, which is sometimes a slow journey to the night. I move around in the gloom, navigating from memory a house that is always the same. I get up from my chair and walk towards Daddy, I stroke the fabric of his armchair, his empty armchair, the burgundy upholstery, indented where he rested his head against it, the fabric he never wanted to change. Love is a clean, rough diamond; and even if it's too late, now he is dead, I should tell him how much I miss him.

He will walk off into the darkness; I will watch him go and remain silent; I never say anything. Sometimes the dam bursts and I cry, all night long, until dawn breaks.

II

The man wakes up in his bed and opens his eyes like a ventriloquist's dummy. His joints are stiff, his cheeks are pale and sunken, he doesn't dare look around. It's still early. He turns over, lies face up, his eyes like saucers.

The first thought that comes into his mind grabs him by the throat and won't let him go: yesterday was the worst day of his life. For too long, every day has been the worst day of his life.

Sitting up in bed, he grasps his head between his hands, feels a viscous mass between his eyes.

Where did he leave the painkillers? From outside come the muffled sounds of a still-sleeping city, sounds that are amplified by his pain.

He woke up frequently last night, in those moments when time ceased to exist, opening his eyes and longing for it to pass, getting back to sleep only fitfully, interrupted by nightmares.

His second thought, now he is more awake, goes directly to the loot from the hold-up. He thinks about how he left the money in the car, and in his mind an avalanche of questions is unleashed, questions he wanted to avoid yesterday. Will the city still be teeming with cops? What is he going to do with seven bags of cash? Where is he going to hide

them? How is he going to shift them from the back seat of the car to a safe place?

He can't avoid the images, the memory of the assault on the armoured truck: a street of grey houses on the outskirts of Montevideo, a neighbourhood of low buildings of brick and unfinished concrete blocks; the white Toyota van and the Nissan, stationary, waiting for the time to come. It's the tense, expectant moment that precedes the attack on the cash truck. Everyone is nervous and impatient, harsh and edgy. Ricardo, alias the Hobo, is in charge. The Hobo curses him, insults him, threatens him; Diego doesn't even remember why. He stays silent, his head down, he's afraid.

The noise of a powerful engine breaks the spell in this street of silent houses. Diego and Ricardo look at each other, their heads turning in perfect synchronicity. The cash truck, early, is approaching from east to west.

The Hobo grunts, the sound you make when you're in the chair, your mouth open and full of cotton wool and metal implements, and the dentist asks you a question. Diego hears him shout: "The truck's coming, it's early. Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck!"

After that, his memories are fragments: the Hobo running, shots, an explosion, an armoured vehicle in flames. A shout, more shouts, random cries, noises and groans becoming louder. Voices inside the armoured truck. He remembers it well: Ricardo, the Calico in one hand and the .38 in the other, goes straight to the front of the truck. Without opening the door, he unleashes one burst, then another, then a third, although the first is enough to reduce the door to splinters, shear the driver's body in two and blow his companion's face off. There is a dull sound,

or at least that's how he recalls it, like an explosion in a feather pillow.

He knows there was another explosion, that he helped the Hobo take the money to the van, but he can't recall anything else about the massacre.

His memory jumps to the moment when the Hobo is standing in front of him, pointing the gun at him, insulting him, about to pull the trigger, to execute him in cold blood; he's afraid, overcome by a wave of nausea, a metallic taste between his teeth. He struggles not to lose consciousness, or maybe he does lose it for an instant, and when he opens his eyes he sees Ricardo, who is no longer pointing the gun at him. Ricardo stumbles, takes a step back. He has a strange expression on his face, his eyes are wide open, he's looking behind Diego. And he falls.

The sky darkens with the speed of an eclipse. Diego follows the direction of Ricardo's gaze and sees Ursula; she is holding a revolver, she puts it in her bag, drinks some water from a bottle. Then she says, "Diego, don't just stand there. Get a move on."

"Ricardo —"

"He's dead – or he will be soon. He was aiming at you, Diego, he wanted to kill you. Didn't you see him? He's a traitor: a traitor and a murderer. I knew him, and I can promise you he wasn't a nice guy."

"Dead?"

"As a dodo, I'd say."

"And you said you knew him?"

"Only in passing. He was the boyfriend of my Auntie Irene's maid."

Then she'll help him into the van with the bags of cash. She'll drive, they'll leave the scene, make their getaway.

Later, somewhere in the city a long way from where the hold-up occurred, they will transfer the cash to Ursula's car, a VW Golf with tinted windows, and each will go their separate way. Ursula will take the van, wipe it clean of prints and dump it, and Diego will keep the VW and the money. They will agree on a rendezvous.

He won't show up. Instead, he'll drive for hours and hours, terrified and sick, gripped by fear; hours during which he will suffer one panic attack after another, an airless infinity, trembling at the thought that the police might catch him and send him back to prison. When he can't take any more, Diego will abandon the car and its contents, parking it on a street a few hundred yards from his apartment, a few hundred yards from the place where he has just woken up.

That was yesterday.

He looks at the green digits on the alarm clock. It's 5.01. His whole body is tingling and his head feels like it's being crushed in a vice.

From the street comes the screech of tyres, the sound of breaking glass, the harsh shouts of a drunk.

He has to get out of bed and deal with the situation. He has to go and get the money. As if he is caught in a nightmare, he thinks, wondering for the first time about the possibility that the money is no longer there, no longer in the car, where he left it covered with a tarpaulin… How long ago was it?

Yesterday, after driving with the cash on the back seat, after swallowing an unspecified number of pills for his anxiety, paralysed and distraught, exhausted and with the fuel tank almost empty, it was all he could do to park the

car, lock it and run to his apartment, throw himself into bed and sleep for ten hours straight.

He couldn't think, his head was full of a dull, maddening sound. Had he locked the doors? Had he set the alarm? Ten hours have passed, at least ten. Anything could have happened in that time.

And anyone who robs a thief who has just robbed another thief is surely guaranteed a pardon. He doesn't even want to think about that possibility. His thoughts are enveloped in a kind of fog and have become incoherent: the money must still be there; no, the money isn't in the car any more; yes, the money must still be there. He's going mad. He looks at the clock again and changes position, pulls the covers over his head and immediately pulls them down again. He is in a cold sweat.

The questions return. How can he remove seven bags of money from a vehicle, how can he shift them without being noticed? How can he transport them without help? And where to? How can he find a safe place to keep them? And, above all, how can he avoid the cops who are crawling all over the place?

He's nauseous. He stares into the bottomless pit, on the edge of panic. Where are his anxiety pills? He feels desperate, aware of his cowardice, he feels like crying. The sound of barking, harsh and nearby, disturbs him, makes him sit up, alert.

He thinks: this apartment isn't safe, the police know he lives here. And the lawyer who organized the hold-up, Antinucci, he knows too, and he's bound to come looking for him, to force him to say where the cash is hidden.

Why didn't he think of that earlier?

He has to get up and disappear, take the money somewhere else before daybreak. If there's still time. He tries to concentrate, to put his brain to work.

Getting out of bed, he looks around, his feet planted on the floor. He forces his body to move, gives orders to his legs. He stands up, the palm of one hand pressing against the door frame, the other on his forehead. He moves through the apartment. He has to think of something.

Where are the car keys? He goes from room to room, still drowsy from the sleeping pills. He finds the keys in the bathroom, on top of the pile of clothes he abandoned on the floor.

He looks for the painkillers, pours himself a glass of water, swallows the pills. He turns on the shower.

He stands under the water as it washes away the sweat and the dust, helping to ease his headache.

When he left the vehicle he wasn't thinking about thieves or broken windows or forced locks. He wasn't thinking about the drug addicts, desperate for their next fix, or about the down-and-outs who spend the winter exposed to the elements, huddled beneath the overpasses.

The only thing he was thinking about was evading the police, dodging the roadblocks, hiding from the helicopters in the sky. No, that's a lie. He was also thinking about Ursula and the rendezvous he had missed, thinking about how he had left her waiting in the garage; he was thinking, as he is thinking now, about that strange woman who always seems to be halfway between amusement and rage. In fact, he feels like going to look for her right now.

The water feels cold although it's actually very hot. He shudders and tries to imagine that the shower is summer rain, like the rain that has soaked him so many times before, and he gradually feels better: he closes his eyes, allows the rain to run down his body.

Diego left Ursula's car in an out-of-the-way spot, a place that was the haunt of junkies and homeless people who lived in the doorways of abandoned stores, people who wandered like shadows among ruined houses, who installed themselves in empty buildings or in the cement skeletons of half-built structures.

He gets out of the shower, shaves off two days' worth of stubble, observes the bags under his eyes, the flaccid skin that hangs beneath his chin, the thinning hair on his forehead. Since he returned from Spain, a few months ago, he must have aged ten years. He tries to remember if he has coffee and milk in the house, if there was any bread or butter left yesterday, before he went out to hold up the truck.

Now he needs to find somewhere to hide the cash. He looks out of the window at the same waxy grey sky that has been there for days, the same wet streets. The statue of General Artigas presides over the square, watching the last people returning home and the first setting off for work.

He thinks of something, turns it over in his head.

He looks for the tablet, connects the keyboard, turns it on.

A revelation crosses the threshold of his understanding and lights up his eyes. He looks for a website, reviews options; he has to act quickly, before he is discovered. He has to get out. He finds the option he is looking for, selects

it, transfers some money. The ping of his email to confirm the operation fills him with a sense of relief and triumph. It's time to act.

He puts on his coat and prepares to leave.